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CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THE HOUSING PROBLEM IN PHILADELPHIA

REPORT PREPARED BY THE OCTAVIA HILL ASSOCIATION

The work of the Octavia Hill Association has been one of detailed management of the houses of the poor and not of investigation, but it cannot let this opportunity pass without describing some of the conditions known to it. No comprehensive report of housing conditions in Philadelphia has ever been made. The Seventh Special Report of the Commissioner of Labor in 1894 on the Slums of Great Cities has interesting data on living conditions at that time in certain sections of the slum districts, while "The Philadelphia Negro," a social study, by W. E. Burghardt Dubois, published by the University of Pennsylvania in 1899, throws a vivid light on the problem in its relation to the colored population of the Seventh Ward. We believe that the time has come for wider consideration of this important subject. Our purpose in this paper is to urge strongly the importance, if not the necessity, of a thorough investigation and that one may be undertaken in the near future before our situation becomes more serious.

Philadelphia had in 1900 a population of 1,293,697 persons, covering an area of almost 130 square miles, with an average density of about fifteen persons to an acre. Of its 258,690 dwelling-houses more than one-half are two-story dwellings, and its average number of persons to a dwelling is 4.91. These facts show that our problems differ radically from those of New York and Chicago and that it is the house built for occupation by a single family and not the tenement, which is the important feature for us to consider. The excellent system which has made Philadelphia famous and has given it a larger proportion of separate dwellings for the working classes than any city of an equal population, has blinded our eyes too long to the evils which have been growing up about us. Until within a few years the building law was practically a dead letter, and no check was placed on the avarice of the landlord in his desire to gain the utmost possible return from his ground space. Even to-day we have no laws for the enforcement of underdrainage and our municipal departments are unable with their small force

of inspectors to cope with the conditions we are facing. These facts have given us problems which though the way to their solution may be plain, yet demand serious consideration.

Philadelphia can be justly proud of the way in which the needs of the regularly employed wage-earner have been met by the small house. In the newer and outlying parts of the city this house is found in its best development. There are rows upon rows, streets upon streets of attractive four and six roomed houses with an increasing number of modern conveniences. Sanitary plumbing, bath, range, furnace, gas, a cemented cellar, a porch and a small yard may be had for from \$15.00 to \$20.00 a month. Three thousand six hundred and twenty-five two-story houses were in 1901 added to the already large number of these and the Building and Loan Associations bear witness to the continued demand and the increase of popular ownership.

Nearer to the centre of the city also, and in the great mill and factory districts, one finds still the individual home, but here the houses are older, the rows seem longer and more unbroken in their monotony and in innumerable courts and alleys there is surface drainage. Here, also, we find the various features of the problem which grows more difficult in the older parts of the city and as the social scale is lowered. In prosperous times, each small house holds one family. In times of industrial depression the house built for one family must with no additional conveniences, no better arrangements for privacy and comfort, accommodate two or more.

For the purpose of this report we have considered mainly the district in the southeastern part of the city where our own work centres.¹ The five wards, where this district lies, contain about one-tenth of the population of the city and cover about one-eightieth of the area or one and three-fifths square miles. The average density of population in these wards is 123 persons to an acre. In the Third Ward the average number increases to 209. The wards are relatively well provided with park area, but the whole amount used for this purpose is only 16.88 acres out of a total of 1030 acres, which shows the crying need there is for more breathing spaces in these congested districts. There are a number of old graveyards which would be valuable additions to the park area if they were so used. The total number of inhabitants in the five wards is

¹ The five wards are the Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth and Seventh. One-half of the Seventh extends out of the district towards the west, but shows many of the same characteristics.

127,466. Of these, 50,733 are foreign born, 17,611 are negroes. It is impossible to attempt a description of the many phases of life throughout this region. The large numbers of foreigners are grouped together according to nationality, in fairly well-defined geographical areas, each showing many characteristics of its own national life. The slum districts shift their centres somewhat in the changing of populations, but are seemingly as strongly entrenched as ever and extend over increasingly large areas. Architecturally the buildings show great variety. Quaint, gabled frame houses often in the most dilapidated condition, modern brick dwellings, colonial houses of fine proportions, and tenements are found side by side often in picturesque proximity.

The size of the block in Philadelphia is an important factor in any consideration of its housing conditions. This block averages about 400 feet square. By the purpose of the founder of the city it was intended that each house should be in the middle of the "breadth of his ground, so as to give place to gardens, etc., such as might be a green country towne which might never be burnt and might always be wholesome."¹ This large size has continued to be the plan of the city and has lent itself readily to being cut up into the network of inner courts and alleys which are practically universal. The gardens, however, in all the poorer districts, have totally disappeared. The small house has been crowded onto the ground formerly allotted to them, and the revenue from the land has been increased by an intensive process, which while not building into the air has covered the ground with large numbers of dwellings. It is the limited height of the buildings that is the saving factor. If the houses were high with the consequent increase of overcrowding to the acre, the conditions would be extreme.

From the various types of houses known to us we have chosen for special mention three of those which show most clearly the character and needs of this district. The most striking of these is the occasional large tenement. In the early nineties the great increase of immigration suggested the building of tenements as a profitable investment. The result was a goodly number of scattered houses, built under the law governing the building of the ordinary dwelling-house and showing some of the worst phases of tenement house construction. Narrow air-shafts, lots closely built

¹ Watson's Annals, Vol. I, p. 43.

over, insufficient plumbing, badly ventilated and dark rooms, inadequate fire-escapes, would if multiplied have thrust upon us a problem of a very serious form. These houses hold from sixteen to fifty families. In many instances the yard space is a long narrow strip on which all the rooms are dependent for air and light except those on the front of the building. When the adjoining lot is covered in the same way the result is a narrow well in which sunshine cannot enter and through which there is no circulation of air. In one case, in a house built on the four sides of its ground, sixty-four rooms open on such a well which is seven feet six inches in width, while in another instance a copy of the New York dumb-bell plan is found. This movement was fortunately watched and arrested in its early development. Through the thoughtful action of Mr. Hector McIntosh and with the co-operation of a number of prominent city officials and others, a wise law was framed and accepted by the Legislature. The evil was checked and the building of large and badly arranged tenements prevented.

Under this act of May 7, 1895, the term tenement is defined as meaning every building which is, or is to be, occupied by three or more families, living independently of each other and doing their cooking on the premises. The act provides that not more than 80 per cent of a lot can be built on, except in corner properties, that the width of a yard shall be not less than eight feet, that every room in such houses shall have a window opening upon a street or upon the yard, that every tenement house over four stories high shall be fireproof throughout. It has also stringent provisions in regard to water supply, sanitation, minimum size of rooms, halls, etc. The cost of building is thus so much increased as to be almost prohibitive.

In 1890 the percentage of families living in tenement houses in Philadelphia was 1.44. Whatever the increase in this figure may be in the census of 1900,¹ it remains true that only the poorest live in one and two rooms, and that as soon as a higher rent can be paid, or a small house can be had at a low rent, the change is eagerly made. The management of all large tenements is very difficult, and manifest evils are sure to follow neglect and inefficiency on the part of the owners. Thus, in a community containing so large a number of small houses, the tide was turned from this plan of

¹ The Second Volume of the Census of 1900 is not yet issued.

housing at a critical moment, the results of which are of far-reaching benefit.

The second class of house which is found prominently is that built for one family of the better class and now converted to the use of three or more families of the very poor. In the history of housing in other cities, these houses have formed one step in the evolution of such tenements as we have described. Here, they form the most important phase of our tenement house problem. May it not be that by wisely adapting them to the needs of the very poor they can take the place of the larger tenements and give to Philadelphia the proud distinction of housing these classes in small buildings, which shall avoid the evils attendant upon the herding of many families together? At present, there are large numbers of houses of this class in the older parts of this region and a total failure of any adaptation of the old arrangements to suit the new conditions. The houses are usually well built and the rooms large and well ventilated, but there is no attempt at adequate or sanitary plumbing. The hydrant in the yard is often the only water supply and there is probably but one closet, also in the yard, the privy well of which may be shared by three adjoining houses. Little attention is given to care or management. The repairs are neglected, the stairways are dark, the halls obstructed by extra furniture and rubbish. In many cases the cellars are damp and filthy and give no provision for storage. The yards are obstructed, there are no arrangements for drying clothes.

The law provides that when buildings are altered into tenements certain provisions shall be enforced, but it makes no mention of the need for this alteration in houses so used without changes, nor does it exact any such changes. The landlord of the district is keenly alive to the fact that when alterations are to be made, an affidavit that the house is to be used by only two families will protect him from the exactions of the tenement house law. A special investigation into houses of this class would surely show how the law could be amended to cover their defects and to fit them at a moderate expenditure and under good regulation to meet the needs of the newly arrived immigrant and of the very poor.

This type of houses built for one family and changed into tenements has another and a worse form when it is used for what is known as a "furnished room house." There is a large, and it is believed a steadily increasing, number of these in the older parts

of the city and where conditions have greatly deteriorated. There are no data on which to estimate their number. A thorough inquiry could be made only with police or other authority behind the workers. These houses are tenements and have all the objectionable features of tenements in a marked degree, besides others peculiar to themselves. These features are intensified by the character of the tenants, who are of the lowest class. Sometimes the houses are used for immoral purposes, and the occupants generally are shiftless, intemperate and slovenly. Some few are deserving families where the breadwinner is out of work. Their conditions are deplorable, and they have not even the stimulus to decent living that comes from the ownership of household goods. The buildings are generally old, and ill-adapted to the number of people crowded in them. The rooms are rented by the week at prices ranging from \$1.50 to \$2.50 per room. They have the scantiest possible equipment of old and dilapidated furniture. They are dirty and unventilated; the beds and bedding indescribable. Water is seldom found above the ground floor. Bath-tubs are unknown or used for storage. In most cases there is but one closet in the yard for all the tenants of the house. The yards, as a rule, are filthy. There is no apparent effort at cleanliness or supervision. One room is the ordinary rule for one family, with frequent boarders in addition. In some cases the large rooms have been divided by flimsy partitions, and each half is occupied by a family. The primary need of these houses is frequent and efficient inspection. This is more urgent than in a case of ordinary tenements, as the occupants are the lowest and the poorest, and unable or unwilling to make any efforts in their own behalf. In no way can the Health and Building Department regulations be enforced, nor any general improvement in the condition of these houses be effected, except by a system of periodic inspection, followed by action by the proper city departments. It is entirely possible that a thorough investigation of these houses made under adequate authority throughout the city, would show the prevalence of conditions warranting a system of licensing—the license to be revoked upon failure by the landlord to enforce reasonable regulations as to cleanliness, decency, overcrowding, etc.—in addition to the present laws applying to all tenement houses.

The third class of houses to which we would draw special attention is that of the rear dwelling, a small two or three-story

house, built sometimes singly and sometimes in rows of from two to eight or ten houses on the rear of the front house. This plan of building has been characterized as the horizontal rather than the vertical tenement. The entrance to the row is by a narrow passage-way from the street or court. This passage-way is also frequently the means by which the surface drainage is carried to the street or to an open sewer-connection at its entrance. The space in front of the houses is the only yard. Sometimes this space widens at the end of the entrance-way and there is a double row of dwellings facing each other and covering the rears of two or three front lots. Sometimes again the open space forms a square with houses on three sides. Thus one comes unexpectedly on a little community whose existence one has not imagined. More often, however, the narrow passage-way runs the whole length of the row and in many cases the brick wall of an adjoining lot shuts away all air and sunshine and makes a prison of the little court.

In a careful investigation made by the college settlement into the sanitary condition of one block in its immediate neighborhood, this type of house was strongly illustrated. Out of a total of 196 houses in the block, over 90 were rear dwellings, and but a small proportion of these was underdrained. The building of rear houses is now prohibited by law. Such an investigation as we ask for would show many localities where some houses should be torn down to give light and air to the others, and other cases where the courts should be cut through or entirely demolished. Where the conditions are good, however, these houses meet the needs of the very poor and offer the advantage of an individual house, at a low rent, even though it involve the common use of yard space and closet and water conveniences.

Enough has been said about sanitation to show the great need of reform. The death rate is not the only gauge of the sanitary condition of the neighborhood. It is shown also in lowered vitality and poor health for which there are no statistical returns. The prevalence of surface drainage in Philadelphia is very imperfectly realized. Of its 1500 miles of streets, according to a Bulletin of the Department of Labor in 1901, there were in that year 419 miles that were unpaved, and 613 miles without sewers, leaving a balance of at least 193 miles of paved streets without underdrainage. In streets where drains have been laid, many houses have not been connected. The open drains still run through the great

majority of alleys, where the decaying matter stands in the gutters and when dried is scattered about by the wind. Neglected and foul privy wells are frequently found. The people are eager to tell their grievances and many are submitting patiently to intolerable conditions.

The most essential step now to be taken by the city is systematic and frequent inspection of sanitary conditions. If it is not possible to enforce underdrainage at once, such inspection would cause it to be enforced where flagrant nuisances exist, and the moral influence of an official would stimulate to better standards. The Board of Health can make but rare inspections on its own initiative and its small force of twenty inspectors of nuisances is unable to respond promptly to the numbers of complaints made to it. If this force and the force of the Bureau of Building Inspection were largely increased, with added powers, the evils of insanitary dwellings and of the evasion of the building law could be readily dealt with. There is no large city where these problems could be more easily solved.

To prove more fully the need of such measures we hope that an investigation full enough to give a comprehensive knowledge of existing conditions may soon be made. The results of such an investigation would not only promote these reforms, but would suggest other means of undoing the evils which have arisen from our long neglect and of safeguarding the future.

We have spoken thus far of the need of reform through legislation and the strengthening of the municipal departments whose work is so important in these districts. Such measures are necessary for all classes; it is for the very poor that something more is needed. The principle cannot be too strongly set forth that it is the management of the dwellings of the poor, whether they live in courts or tenements, that is to be the means of securing to them health and comfort, of giving them, in reality, homes. Miss Octavia Hill began in London in 1864 the work that was destined from the strength of its underlying principles to become a significant factor in dealing on these lines with the housing problem in Europe and also to some extent in this country.

While considering that the "spiritual elevation of a large class depends to a considerable extent on sanitary reform,"¹ Miss Hill believes also that sanitary improvement itself depends upon the

¹ "Homes of the London Poor," by Octavia Hill.

educational work among grown-up people and that this work must be effected by individual influence. It is this influence in the hands of the landlord or his representative that is so great a power, and can be used either for weal or woe.

Miss Hill's plan is not to tear down old buildings and to begin anew, but to improve existing conditions gradually as the tenants are trained gradually to appreciate and desire better things. This work is done with the assistance of large numbers of volunteer rent collectors, each one of whom is specially trained and is given a small group of tenants to care for. We quote from Miss Hill as to the duties of the collectors: "We have tried so far as possible to enlist ladies who would have an idea of how, by diligent attention to all business which devolves on a landlord, by wise rule with regard to all duties which a tenant should fulfill, by sympathetic and just decisions with a view to the common good, a high standard of management could be obtained. Repairs promptly and efficiently attended to, references carefully taken up, cleaning sedulously supervised, overcrowding put an end to, the blessing of ready money payment enforced, accounts strictly kept and, above all, tenants so sorted as to be helpful to one another." The relation thus established on a basis of mutual obligation is one of real and often enduring helpfulness, and the opportunities for service are almost unlimited.

Miss Hill's work has from the first been on a sound business basis and has given excellent financial returns. She has never formed any association of the owners of the many properties under her care, or of the workers who manage them. She has felt that the work is freer, and more real when thus untrammelled.

Many cities have followed the example of London in this plan of work. That of the Edinburgh Social Union is of unusual interest. It believes, as we must all believe, that the "immediate question to face is how to make the best of present conditions, how to raise the standard of comfort without waiting for legislative changes." Its reports tell a story of successful growth which is full of valuable and suggestive experience.

In Philadelphia the need for the extension of such work grows to us stronger and more insistent as we learn more of the neglected places of our city, of the many streets and courts which need such influences as these. We believe that this work must grow and that there will come also a more realizing sense of the responsibility of

the community for the welfare of its people. In the wise control of new building, and of the apartment houses which may be tenements in the future, by planning for wide streets and many open spaces, by the awakening of higher civic standards we shall come also to a higher social order. "Victory over evil at its source and not in its consequences; reforms which shall regard the welfare of future generations, who are the greatest number."¹

EDITOR'S NOTE.—The Octavia Hill Association is a stock company organized to improve living conditions in such neighborhoods as those described in the foregoing paper, on lines similar to the work of Miss Octavia Hill in London. Its aim is to improve old houses and small properties rather than to build new ones. It uses women rent collectors, both paid workers and volunteers. The Association was organized in 1896 and has a capital stock of \$50,000; it has paid yearly dividends of 4 per cent and 4½ per cent. Its capital is invested in houses which when purchased were typical of the classes above described. These houses have been properly altered and repaired and demonstrate the possibility of overcoming such conditions and yet receiving a fair financial return. The Association assumes also the management of property for other owners. It has seventy-seven houses now under its care, sixty-five of which are small houses for separate families, and twelve are tenements of a medium size, averaging eleven or twelve rooms each. The Association desires especially to extend its work of managing the properties of other owners, believing that the relation thus established is stronger and more enduring than where the ownership is in a company. Its directors are:

Nathaniel B. Crenshaw, President, Girard Trust Company, Broad and Chestnut streets; Miss Hannah Fox, 339 South Broad street; Mrs. William F. Jenks, 920 Clinton street; Mrs. Thomas S. Kirkbride, Secretary, 1406 Spruce street; Hector McIntosh, 605 North Sixteenth street; Miss Helen L. Parrish, 1135 Spruce street; Mrs. William M. Lybrand, 139 East Walnut Lane, Germantown; George Woodward, M. D., Chestnut Hill; C. H. Ludington, Jr., Treasurer, 425 Arch street.

¹ "Lessons from Work." (B. F. Westcott.)